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## **Democratisation beyond Capitalist Time: Temporalities of Transition in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings**

Trapped in the premises of the transition 'paradogma', democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature are limited by a linear and continuous understanding of time, a gradualist view of transition, and a procedural definition of democracy. These analytical and normative strictures are compounded by a methodological nationalism that prevents an appreciation of how global factors shape the parameters for political transformation in the contemporary Middle East. Inspired by Gramsci's theory of history, this paper seeks to move beyond these limitations and explore the prospect of transition as rupture, away from democratisation as strategy for ensuring duration of capitalist time, and towards democratic transition as epochal change beyond capitalism. By counterposing the effects of the two globalisations and the decolonisation in between on the prospects of political transformation in the Middle East, this paper argues that the Arab uprisings provide an opportunity for thinking globally and rupturally about political time, transition and democracy in the region.

**Keywords:** democratisation, transition, Arab uprisings, Gramsci, absolute historicism, time

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# Democratisation beyond Capitalist Time:

## Temporalities of Transition in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings

### Introduction

In 2011, the Arab uprisings appeared to many observers as a rupture in the history of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa. As much as it led to the greatest wave of popular mobilisation of this century, seven years on it is difficult to maintain that the uprisings provided such a clean break with the past. This outcome has yet again been processed by the democratisation literature as a result of the missing preconditions for a democratic transition.<sup>1</sup> The literature on authoritarian persistence has similarly looked for distinctive features in the region that have hampered or reversed regime change, for instance focusing on the adaptability of incumbents to changing circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that this view is partial, and suggests that both democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature suffer from two significant limitations.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, they are characterised by a methodological nationalism that prevents them from adequately appreciating the extent to which global transformations have affected the conditions of existence of different social formations, especially in the periphery of the global political economy. While in the Middle East this tendency veers towards a 'methodological regionalism', the limits in appreciating the structuring impact of global transformations on the prospects of democratic transition locally remain apparent. Secondly, both democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature do not pay sustained attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Stepan & Juan Linz (2013) Democratization Theory and the 'Arab Spring', *Journal of Democracy*, 24(2), pp. 15-30; Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk (2016) The Arab Spring: A Fourth Wave of Democratization?, *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 25(1), pp. 52-69; Philippe Schmitter & Nadine Sika (2017) Democratization in the Middle East and North Africa: A More Ambidextrous Process?, *Mediterranean Politics*, 22(4), pp. 443-463.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Stacher (2012) *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders (eds.) (2013) *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

<sup>3</sup> This paper takes a comprehensive definition of democratisation, which includes both the first-generation approach informed by modernisation theory and the more elite-centred 'transitology' approach. See Terry L. Karl & Philippe Schmitter (1991) Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe, *International Social Science Journal*, 128(2), pp. 267-282. Similarly, authoritarian persistence literature encompasses all approaches emphasising continuity in and adaptation of authoritarian rule, in the form of 'resilience', 'upgrading' or 'learning'. See Ray Hinnebusch (2006) Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique, *Democratization*, 13(3), pp. 373-395; Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders (2011) Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening', *Globalizations*, 8(5), pp. 647-653.

time and temporality, and their definition of transition and democracy suffers from this. Political time is implied as fundamentally continuous. Transition is conceived in gradualist terms, so that, while possibly triggered by radical mass mobilisation, it is expected to occur along an elite-led path similar to the one experienced in third-wave ‘pacted’ or ‘imposed’ transitions.<sup>4</sup> Finally, democracy is defined in the liberal-procedural terms of Dahl’s polyarchy.<sup>5</sup> Because of these choices, both bodies of literature tend to overlook discontinuous, abrupt, and non-procedural paths to regime and more generally political transformation. This also has implications for how local agency is understood, as this literature relays the post-World War II political history of the region as littered with memories of failure, and more specifically of the failure to democratise. These elements are all discussed in the first section of the paper.

To address these limitations, the second section draws on two elements of Gramsci’s theory of history. It first expands on the limited understanding of time and transition in political regimes literature by drawing on Gramsci’s distinction between time as epochal change (*fare epoca*) and time as duration (*durare*).<sup>6</sup> This enables us to envisage the prospect of transition as rupture. Then, the paper focuses on Gramsci’s notion of ‘absolute historicism’, which emphasises how elements of the past appear, if often in different guises, also in the present.<sup>7</sup> This in turn brings into the discussion space and place as well as time, allowing us to explore how world-historical conditions structures the possibilities for political transformation, thus bringing into relief how global factors, and the hierarchies they embody and reproduce, shape the terrain in which local agents find themselves. Finally, Gramsci’s best known concept – hegemony – enables a powerful critique of liberal-procedural definitions of democracy.

Once we broaden our understanding of time, transition and democracy, the third section explores the effects on the Middle East of the two globalisations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the decolonisation in between, to understand how world-historical conditions have structured political time in the region, and with it the prospects of political

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<sup>4</sup> Guillermo O’Donnell & Philippe Schmitter (1986) *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). Karl & Schmitter, *Modes of Transition*.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Dahl (1989) *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1975) *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 Vols (Turin: Einaudi), p. 1744. See also Peter Thomas (2009) *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 152-3.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart), pp. 465. See also Adam D. Morton (2007) *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 15-38.

transformation. In addition to illustrating the potential of Gramsci's theory of history, this section also outlines how the limitations of political regimes literature weaken its ability to full grasp the implications of the Arab uprisings, and their challenge to the dependent temporality of neoliberal globalisation. Hence, while engaging only peripherally with issues of memory, the critique of dominant understandings of time, transition and democracy provided in this paper clears the ground for approaches that forefront time and memory in order to discern the prospects for political change in the region, as it happens in the remainder of this special issue.

### **Making new sense of the old limits of political regimes literature**

The Arab uprisings have led to a resurgence of the three main strands of democratisation theory, respectively rooted in modernisation theory, pluralist elite theory and historical sociology.<sup>8</sup> As events in the region unfolded, optimism and buoyancy have been replaced by cynicism and a return towards emphasising the obstacles to democratic transition.<sup>9</sup> Such a shift is inserted in a well-known pattern of waves of optimism and pessimism in the scholarly analysis of the democratic prospects of the region.<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s, this produced confident claims about looming democratisation following measures of limited political liberalisation,<sup>11</sup> whereas the swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction in the following decade was interpreted with reference to the resilience and adaptability of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding major differences in their analysis of empirical developments, both democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature focusing on the Middle East are trapped in the same *paradogma*.<sup>13</sup> Two of the resulting limitations are especially relevant

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Grugel & Matthew L. Bishop (2013) *Democratization: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 75-96. For each tradition, see respectively Stepan & Linz, *Democratization Theory*; Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud & Andrew Reynolds (2013) Why the Modest Harvest?, *Journal of Democracy*, 24(4), pp. 29-44; Jamie Allinson (2015) Class Forces, Transition and the Arab Uprisings: A Comparison of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, *Democratization*, 22(2), pp. 294-314.

<sup>9</sup> Eva Bellin (2012) Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring, *Comparative Politics*, 44(2), pp. 127-149; Brownlee et al., *Modest Harvest*.

<sup>10</sup> Morten Valbjørn & André Bank (2010) Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization: The Future of Middle Eastern Political Rule through Lenses of the Past, *Middle East Critique*, 19(3), pp. 183-200.

<sup>11</sup> Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany & Paul Noble (eds.) (1995) *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner); Augustus R. Norton (1993) The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East, *Middle East Journal*, 47(2), pp. 205-216.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Brownlee (2007) *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Oliver Schlumberger (ed.) (2007) *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats*.

<sup>13</sup> Morten Valbjørn (2014) Three Ways of Revisiting the (Post-)Democratization Debate after the Arab Uprisings, *Mediterranean Politics*, 19(1), pp. 157-160.

within the scope of this paper. First, as the conditions for democratic transition are assumed to be located within the social formation,<sup>14</sup> with international actors and factors conceived at most as external enablers or disablers through the use of leverage and linkages,<sup>15</sup> these bodies of literature are marred by methodological nationalism. Analytically, this puts them at a disadvantage when addressing the extent to which global transformations have restructured Middle Eastern states and societies. While this does not mean that local dynamics have become a mere reflection of global changes, it implies that local possibilities for regime transition can only be adequately assessed within a global context. This is extremely difficult through dominant approaches to democratic transition, as in its early stages democratisation theory tended to see the political future of peripheral countries as mirroring the past of advanced states,<sup>16</sup> while more recently it has assessed the prospects of democratic transition through third-wave experiences.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, the prospects of regime change are abstracted from global political and economic hierarchies.

Second, largely because of the formative influence of the Cold War on American political science, democratisation literature tends to suffer from a liberal bias. Lisa Anderson outlined how this resulted analytically in a narrow focus on parliaments, parties, elections and other liberal institutions.<sup>18</sup> However, the liberal bias also has normative implications for how transition and democracy are understood. The former is conceptualised in gradualist terms, and hence revolutionary ruptures can lead to democratisation to the extent in which they can be channelled back towards negotiated settlements typical of third-wave transitions.<sup>19</sup> Democracy is instead defined in a 'monolithically liberal and narrowly procedural fashion',<sup>20</sup> and hence as the sum of free, fair and competitive elections, legal equality and freedom of information, expression and association. In turn, the narrowing down

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<sup>14</sup> Mohammed Ayoob (2005) The Muslim World's Poor Record of Modernization and Democratization: The Interplay of External and Internal Factors, in S. Hunter & H. Malick (eds.) *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam* (Westport: Praeger), p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> Lucan Way & Steven Levitsky (2007) Linkage, Leverage, and the Post-Communist Divide, *East European Politics and Societies*, 21(1), pp. 48-66.

<sup>16</sup> Such an approach is at the heart of political development theory, heavily influential in the late 1960s and 1970s. See Paul Cammack (1994) Political Development Theory and the Dissemination of Democracy, *Democratization*, 1(2), pp. 353-374. Then, the extent to which even the past of core countries on which these theories draw is an idealised version of the actual past is the subject of a great study in historical sociology. See Sandra Halperin (1997) *In the Mirror of the Third World: Capitalist Development in Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

<sup>17</sup> Stepan & Linz, *Democratization Theory*; Abushouk, *The Arab Spring*.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Anderson (2006) Searching Where the Light Shines: Studying Democratization in the Middle East, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, pp. 189-214.

<sup>19</sup> Schmitter & Sika, *Democratization*, p. 457-58.

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Teti (2012) What Lies Beyond the Wub: The Challenges of (Post)Democratization, *Middle East Critique*, 21(1), p. 18.

of the meaning of both transition as process and democracy as end point entails the *a priori* identification of a trajectory where transition gradually leads from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy.<sup>21</sup> The liberal bias also matters because, by positing an ontological separation between politics and the economy, it has historically based the study of democratic transitions on the implicit assumption that democracy is only possible within capitalist social relations, and hence democratic transitions can only occur *within* or *towards* capitalism.

In the Middle East methodological nationalism meets Orientalism, thus turning into a form of 'methodological regionalism' that affects both democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature. During the third wave in Latin America, East Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa, political regime scholarship accounted for the Middle Eastern 'exception' by focusing on what is missing or wrong with the region, invoking the supposed cultural exceptionalism of the Arab world, variously linked to Islam, neopatriarchy, and mass passivity.<sup>22</sup> Other sources of regional exceptionalism have been identified in the post-colonial legacies on state formation;<sup>23</sup> a traditionally weak civil society in the face of a strong coercive apparatus;<sup>24</sup> and a state-dominated economy, which in oil-rich countries takes the form of a rentier state.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the causes for the absence of democratic transitions in the region have been localised and essentialised, both flattening out intra-regional complexity,<sup>26</sup> and glorifying democratic transitions elsewhere, neglecting their own precariousness and 'incompleteness'.<sup>27</sup> Even the literature maintaining that we should be looking for explanations 'less in absent prerequisites of democratization and more in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism'<sup>28</sup> only partly addresses these limitations, as it is still concerned with local factors preventing the unfolding of democratic transitions in the region, thus challenging

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Camau (2002) Sociétés civiles 'réelles' et téléologie de la démocratisation, *Revue Internationale d'Economie Politique*, 9(2), pp. 213-232; Teti, What Lies Beyond, pp. 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> See respectively Elie Kedourie (1992) *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Washington, Washington Institute for Near East Policy); Hisham Sharabi (1988) *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Samuel Huntington (1984) Will More Countries Become Democratic?, *Political Science Quarterly*, 99(2), pp. 193-218.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Bromley (1994) *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press).

<sup>24</sup> Yahya Sadowski (1993) The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate, *Middle East Report*, 183, pp. 14-21.

<sup>25</sup> Hazem Beblawi & Giacomo Luciani (eds.) (1987) *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm).

<sup>26</sup> For instance paying insufficient attention to the cases of Arab democracy, such as Lebanon, and to the cases in which political opening, if not necessarily democratisation, was shut down with vast international support, as in Algeria.

<sup>27</sup> Visible especially in the proliferation of democracies 'with adjectives' to describe limitations of third-wave democracies. See David Collier & Steven Levitsky (1997) Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research, *World Politics*, 49(3), pp. 430-451.

<sup>28</sup> Eva Bellin (2004) The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East, *Comparative Politics*, 36(2), p. 143.

the teleology of transition on empirical grounds but essentially accepting its epistemological legitimacy.

The inadequate conceptualisation of political time in both democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature might have something to do with these limitations. Both traditions subscribe to an understanding of time as *chronos*, that is: 'time as quantitatively measurable duration', which can be associated both with 'time as linear, infinite succession' and 'with the inevitable birth-death life cycle of individuals'.<sup>29</sup> Whether linear or cyclical, this temporality is characterised by measurability and divisibility along the same axis of duration. In democratisation literature, this is seen, much like transition, in terms of 'complex linearity'.<sup>30</sup> In authoritarian persistence literature, political time is still continuous but also continuously repeating itself, either through Lampedusa's motto 'if we want things to stay as they are things will have to change',<sup>31</sup> or through 'an eternal cycle of authoritarianism and war'.<sup>32</sup> Either way, much like in García Márquez' Macondo, time that passes but yet stands still enables the emergence of 'a timeless realm in which myth can exist':<sup>33</sup> in the Middle East, the myth of 'the stable Orient'.<sup>34</sup> There are however *times* in which such duration breaks down, or is at least challenged, opening to the possibility of different temporalities and futurities. Classical Greek philosophers would call this 'transformational time for action' *kairos*.<sup>35</sup> Dominant approaches to regime transition appear to neglect this possibility of temporal disruption, and in turn of transition as *rupture*.

If political time is understood as continuous, either in terms of linearity or cyclicity, we are then left either with the reproduction of authoritarian rule or with democratic transition. If the latter is further narrowed down as we have seen, we can see how, in an age in which transnational economic entanglements might lead to capital flight, gradualism paves the way to framing democratisation as a trade-off between political transformation and economic stability. Insofar as the latter is embedded within, and defined through, capitalist

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<sup>29</sup> Kimberly Hutchings (2008) *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Teti, *What Lies Beyond*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Morten Valbjørn (2015) Reflections on Self-Reflections: On Framing the Analytical Implications of the Arab Uprisings for the Study of Arab Politics, *Democratization*, 22(2), pp. 218-238.

<sup>32</sup> Schmitter & Sika, *Democratization*, p. 443.

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Sims (1976) García Márquez' "La Hojarasca": Paradigm of Time and Search for Myth, *Hispania*, 59(4), pp. 810-819.

<sup>34</sup> Morten Valbjørn (2012) Upgrading Post-Democratization Studies: Examining a Re-politicized Arab World in a Transition to Somewhere, *Middle East Critique*, 21(1), p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Hutchings, *Time*, p. 5.



social relations, then gradualism might well be seen as aiming to prolong the duration of a singular temporality, that of capitalist time.

This narrow understanding of time, transition and democracy identifies the parameters for knowledge production on regime change and shapes the study of political agency in the Middle East. Dominant literature portrays the political history of the Middle East since decolonisation as littered with memories of failure to become democratic, with its causes localised and essentialised. As a result, agency from below is usually devalued as an engine of lasting political transformations, when not demeaned and infantilised altogether. This happens for instance in the literature that sees popular agency during the uprisings as distorted by cognitive biases that prevented protesters from grasping their limited chances of success.<sup>36</sup> Similar comments have at times been inscribed within ‘a logic of superiority and subjugation’,<sup>37</sup> for instance when Schmitter and Sika argue that popular mobilisations in the Arab world have failed to learn from third-wave transitions to instead fall back on ‘the previously dominant modes of transition’,<sup>38</sup> characterised by largely outdated anti-*ancient régime* mass protests.

Insofar as they challenge the definition of time as continuous, of transition as necessarily gradual, and of democracy in liberal-procedural terms, the Arab uprisings present themselves as a possible epistemic rupture, introducing the space for thinking time, transition and democracy differently. As this opportunity is yet to be grasped by democratisation and authoritarian persistence literature alike, through reference to Gramsci the rest of this paper attempts to do just that.

### **Gramsci and the globally situated temporalities of transition**

This section outlines how Gramsci’s theory of history permits an exploration of *kairos*, of ruptural time, that, in addition to expanding the ways in which we can think of time and transition, also overcomes the methodological nationalism of political regimes literature insofar as it inserts and embeds the local within a global context. Additionally, insofar as hegemony emerges in Gramsci’s work also as a critique of liberal democracy, it allows us to think substantially about democratisation.

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<sup>36</sup> Kurt Weyland (2012) The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?, *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(4), pp. 917-934.

<sup>37</sup> Larbi Sadiki (2009) *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. vii.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 458.

Gramsci's theory of history is undoubtedly more complex than the prevalent understanding of how Marxist thought sees history. On the one hand, via the work of Italian idealist Benedetto Croce, Gramsci was influenced by Hegel's view of history as necessity and as dialectical progression towards the realisation of freedom, but he was also critical of its teleological tendencies. In this regard, Gramsci recalls Goethe's epigram: 'cork [raw material] was not born to made cork [to seal bottles]'.<sup>39</sup> According to Gramsci, this teleological element often leads Croce to produce 'history by design', rather than rigorous historical analysis. On the other hand, Gramsci was also fascinated by the work of late 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker Giambattista Vico, praised because 'he was able to conceive the vast world from a dead little corner of history'.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Hegel Vico also lends a significant weight to human agency and contingency, if ultimately inserted within a cyclical view of civilisations. Two elements in Gramsci's theory of history, especially relevant within the context of this paper, allow him to synthesise and overcome Hegel and Vico.

Firstly, Gramsci develops a distinction between 'duration' and 'epochal change', not unlike the one outlined above between *chronos* and *kairos*. After presenting passive revolution as the structural transformation of a social formation that dominant forces carry out through state power in a way that fundamentally consolidates the *status quo*,<sup>41</sup> Gramsci suggests that this process prolongs the duration of an epoch (*durare*), but is unable to establish a new historical epoch (*fare epoca*).<sup>42</sup> This opens the possibility of moving beyond the singular temporality of political regimes scholarship in the Middle East. Gramsci's distinction is rooted within a Marxist understanding of the dynamics of capitalist development as an inherently global process. From this perspective, the more productive forces develop under capitalist social relations, the more fragile and provisional the attempts to restore duration will be, and the more global and international factors will condition the possibilities for local agency. Such a view resonates with the geographical literature on uneven development, and especially with David Harvey's account of globalisation as a process of 'time-space compression'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ironically, unlike in Italian, English language internalises this teleology, as it uses cork to refer to both the raw material (in Italian, *sughero*) and its most common final product (*tappo*). See Antonio Gramsci (1975), *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 Vols. (Turin: Einaudi), p. 1450.

<sup>40</sup> Antonio Gramsci (2007) *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, edited and translated by J. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 232.

<sup>41</sup> Roberto Roccu (2017) Passive Revolution Revisited: From the *Prison Notebooks* to Our 'Great and Terrible World', *Capital & Class*, 41(3), pp. 537-559.

<sup>42</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1744. See also Peter Thomas (2009) *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 152-53, which draws a parallel between Gramsci's *fare epoca* and Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*.

<sup>43</sup> David Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 240-42.

Secondly, the distinctiveness of Gramsci's theory of history has often been identified in his references to 'absolute historicism',<sup>44</sup> to be intended not as 'absolutely historicist' but as both 'absolute' and 'historicist'.<sup>45</sup> The first term refers to how past processes might have kernels that reappear in the present, thus revealing their organic, as opposed to contingent, nature within history, which endows them with the possibility of experiencing 'afterlives'.<sup>46</sup> 'Historicist' refers instead to the immanent, but not predetermined, possibilities for development within the historical process. Inserted within the considerations above on the ever-greater relevance of global determinants in capitalist development, absolute historicism implies that similarities between past and present must be seen within, and related to, a changing global context. In addition to providing a dialectical synthesis of Hegel's and Vico's understandings of time and progress, this reference to the global also provides a much needed antidote to the methodological nationalism of political regimes literature.

Additionally, if separately, hegemony is developed by Gramsci also as a critique of liberal conceptions of democracy,<sup>47</sup> as it focuses on the substantive advancements for subaltern groups provided by a hegemonic class. This position shines through especially in Gramsci's engagement with both Marxist authors and the elitist tradition of Mosca, Michels and Pareto. Here, Gramsci criticises the liberal-procedural definition of democracy, within which 'the historicist rationality of numerical consent is systematically undermined by the influence of wealth'.<sup>48</sup> He also calls for "'democratic" forms that are more substantial than the formal "democracy" of the present time',<sup>49</sup> pointing towards a conception of democracy that encompasses a socio-economic dimension, necessary to create the avenues for the individual and collective emancipation of subaltern groups.

In sum, Gramsci's theory of history helps us make new sense of the relation between time and transition in two ways. On the one hand, through the opposition between duration and epochal change it creates room for thinking of transition as rupture of (capitalist) time. This in turn enables us to avoid presenting democracy and democratisation as exclusively linked to a transition *towards* or *within* capitalism, and to envisage democratisation as the emergence of a new historical epoch *beyond* the temporality of capitalist social relations. On the other hand, Gramsci's absolute historicism encourages an excavation of the past to

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<sup>44</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1437.

<sup>45</sup> Adam D. Morton (2007) *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 24-36.

<sup>46</sup> See Sara Salem's contribution to this special issue.

<sup>47</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, p. 345.

<sup>48</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1625.

<sup>49</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, p. 126.

understand the present and chart possible futures, while retaining a focus on the shaping power of world-historical conditions. With reference to the prospects for democratic transformation in the Middle East, this excavation is at the heart of the next section, which looks at the conditions for local agency during the two waves of globalisation as well as the post-World War II interregnum marked by decolonisation.

### **Paths to democracy in the Middle East in a global age**

In light of the mainly theoretical-methodological contribution of this piece, and of the mismatch between a very long timespan and limited space to cover it, this section only provides an abbreviated illustration of how Gramsci's theory of history can shed light on the current world-historical conjuncture, its temporality, and the possibilities of democratic transformation in the contemporary Middle East.

The first globalisation, with its post-World War I tail, incorporated the Middle East in the world market on subordinate terms. Following the colonisation of North Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fateful events of 1917 leading to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, and including the promise of statehood to local rulers willing to take arms against the Ottomans, the establishment of the mandate system, and the Balfour Declaration,<sup>50</sup> all contributed to entrenching the temporality of capitalism within the region, and most crucially to entrench it as a temporality of dependency. This was constituted not only through extraction, production and exchange, but also through financial channels, which via indebtedness and fiscal crisis were central to establishing economic subordination already in the lead-up to the 1875 Ottoman bankruptcy.<sup>51</sup> This subordination also had very specific social correlates, with the emergence of a *comprador* bourgeoisie that allied with local landed elites provided support to foreign rule.<sup>52</sup> As it established a hierarchical form of hub-and-spoke integration, this historical period also sowed the seeds of anticolonial nationalism,<sup>53</sup> which will become central to the international relations of the Middle East following World War II.

Situated within this global context, the limited prospects for political transformation become apparent. Popular opposition to the colonial project usually took the form of 'sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness' that Gramsci associated with weak and unorganised subaltern

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<sup>50</sup> Avi Shlaim (1995) *War and Peace in the Middle East* (London: Penguin), p. 11-13.

<sup>51</sup> Roger Owen & Şevket Pamuk (1998) *A History of Middle East Economies in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Juan R. Cole (1999) *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press).

<sup>53</sup> Eric Davis (1983) *Challenging Colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian Industrialization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

classes.<sup>54</sup> The major exception of this period, the emergence of Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, contains enough idiosyncrasies to be seen as confirming rather than disproving the rule, from the absence of colonial rule to the centrality of elite-led, and indeed army-dominated, agency. In fact, this latter element prefigures what will happen in the majority of the Arab republics established in the wake of decolonisation.

The dissolution of the mandate system and of colonial empires in the region, in addition to the emergence of an 'Arab state system',<sup>55</sup> also created the space for an attempt at dismantling the colonial structures of economic dependency, and indeed establishing a new historical epoch. Local agency was central to this attempt, taking place especially in the new Arab republics, where the project of political and economic independence was heavily shaped by anticolonial nationalism.<sup>56</sup> Crucially, while usually embodied in forms of elite agency, and often of military coups, this liberation project enjoyed a high degree of popular support.<sup>57</sup> However, this hegemonic element at best only ameliorated the antinomies of anticolonial nationalism. If the colonial era saw a very clear-cut opposition between exploited popular masses in the Middle East and colonial exploiters, with only a narrow section of the local population benefitting from the colonial political economy, in its historical manifestation anticolonial nationalism privileged one side of the emancipatory agenda over the other. Whereas anticolonialism was essential to the struggle against imperialism, and hence for achieving a measure of external emancipation, the appeal to the nation stifled and marginalised demands for emancipation within the state. This resulted not only in the repression of internal dissent, but also in measures that, while socially and economically progressive, presented themselves as the top-down concessions of a paternalistic state. Hence, while the so-called 'bread democracy' (*dimuqratiyyat al-khubz*)<sup>58</sup> met the basic economic demands of the population through some redistribution, a necessary but insufficient component of substantive democratisation, it did so at the expense of political rights and more generally genuine political emancipation within the social formation: the promised epoch of emancipation was born amputated, rendering its challenge to the capitalist temporality of dependency inherently vulnerable.

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<sup>54</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, p. 252.

<sup>55</sup> Ilya Harik (1985) *The Origins of the Arab State System*, *International Spectator*, 20(2), pp. 20-32.

<sup>56</sup> See Alina Sajed on Third Worldism in this special issue.

<sup>57</sup> See Sara Salem's considerations in this special issue on the hegemony of the Nasserist project in Egypt until the late 1960s.

<sup>58</sup> Sadiki, *Rethinking*, p. 211.

Following the crushing defeat of the anticolonial challenge in the late 1960s, the transnationalisation of finance and production in the following decade provided the context within which the structures and strictures of the first globalisation were re-established in the Middle East, if under new conditions.<sup>59</sup> Under the combined threat of debt crisis and capital flight, governments of oil-scarce countries especially have been disciplined into abandoning import-substitution industrialisation, returning to international financial markets for borrowing. Whenever occurring, fiscal crises have been exploited to force an economic restructuring that, in the name of outward-orientation, has favoured international investors through privatisations and the liberalisation of trade, capital account and foreign direct investment, which in turn have contributed to integrating the Middle East in the global political economy on subordinate terms. The social correlate of these economic transformations has been the 're-compradorisation' of the ruling classes of the region.<sup>60</sup> If relations of economic dependency with core social formations have been re-established, there are also at least two genuinely new features of relevance to this paper. Firstly, if the colonial subordination of the first globalisation was both formal and substantive, we now have Middle Eastern states that are formally independent, but lack 'effective independence'.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, the systematic investment of oil revenues in advanced financial markets has created the foundations for the emergence of a structure not only of global but also of regional dependency, as witnessed by the ever-greater interference of oil-rich states in the domestic affairs of oil-scarce ones.<sup>62</sup> Here, one can see how the pondered historical analogy implied by absolute historicism uncovers the reassertion of the past, in terms of economic dependency, but also new specificities of its manifestation.

How does this global context affect the prospects for political transformation in the region? The economic results of this subordinate integration are well known, in the form of greater exposure to global shocks,<sup>63</sup> limited gains from integration in global markets,<sup>64</sup> which

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<sup>59</sup> Sara Salem (2018) Reading Egypt's Postcolonial State Through Frantz Fanon: Hegemony, Dependency and Development, *Interventions*, 20(3), pp. 428-445.

<sup>60</sup> Samir Amin (2012) *The Reawakening of the Arab World: Challenge and Change in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring* (New York: Monthly Review Press), pp. 168-228.

<sup>61</sup> For a definition, see Anthony G. Hopkins (2018) *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> Adam Hanieh (2018) *Money, Markets and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>63</sup> Marco Lagi, Karla Z. Bertrand & Yaneer Bar-Yam (2011) The Food Crisis and Political Instability in North Africa and the Middle East, *New England Complex Systems Institute*, 28 September, available at: [http://necsi.edu/research/social/food\\_crises.pdf](http://necsi.edu/research/social/food_crises.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2014) *Arab Middle Class: Measurement and Role in Driving Change* (New York: United Nations).

additionally are distributed extremely unevenly, as are its costs.<sup>65</sup> This is the context of the Arab uprisings, which in turn demonstrated the possibilities for democratic transformation in the region. Yet, without in any way wanting to underestimate its achievements, the success story of the uprisings – Tunisia – also demonstrates the limits of third-wave transitions in the contemporary Middle East. Here, mass protests were followed by negotiations among competing elites leading to the establishment of the institutions of liberal democracy.<sup>66</sup> This success, however, has meant neglecting socio-economic demands and confirming a subordinate position within the global economy. Following the trajectory of third-wave democracies, the Tunisian revolution has been channelled onto a gradualist and procedural path, which especially since the rise of *Nidaa' Tounes* sees a reincorporation of elites from the Ben Ali era. In many respects this resembles the passive revolutions evoked by Gramsci, in which the internal and external relations of force and dependence that led to the uprisings are reproduced rather than challenged. Thus, even the more successful case appears as yet another transition restoring the duration of the old temporality rather than establishing a new one, and indeed adapting the pace, scope and degree of political change to the requirements of economic stability, and hence of capitalist time.

Analytically, the combination of methodological nationalism and a narrow understanding of time, transition and democracy prevent democratisation from adequately accounting for the current conjuncture. The national bourgeoisie often considered as the engine of democratic transformation in the region takes the form of rentier elites in the Gulf and of 'compradors' elsewhere. Under the twin attack of state repression and lower protection to attract foreign investment, organised workers, historically the most consistent pro-democracy group,<sup>67</sup> have also been dramatically weakened. The middle class lauded by first-generation democratisation theory has itself been impoverished.<sup>68</sup> The polarisation produced by the dramatic increase in inequality has in turn eroded that middle ground that transitologists consider key to the compromise between soft-liners in both regime and opposition.<sup>69</sup> In sum, the very globalisation hailed for initiating the third wave of

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<sup>65</sup> Facundo Alvaredo, Lydia Assouad & Thomas Piketty (2017) *Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The World's Most Unequal Region?*, *WID.world Working Paper Series*, 2017/15, Paris.

<sup>66</sup> Silvia Colombo (2018) *Political and Institutional Transition in North Africa: Egypt and Tunisia in Comparative Perspective* (London: Routledge).

<sup>67</sup> Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber-Stephens & John Stephens (1992) *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> ESCWA, *Arab Middle Class*.

<sup>69</sup> Alvaredo et al., *Measuring Inequality*.

democratisation appears to have in the long run undermined the social preconditions for gradual democratic transitions in the Middle East.

If also the most successful transition in the region rests on shaky foundations, and if the latest globalisation has produced such devastating socio-economic transformations, this need not lead us to the pessimistic conclusions of the authoritarian persistence literature. Both history and peculiarities of the current conjuncture suggest that regime change is possible, but has chances of consolidation only if embedded in broader social, political and economic transformations. Especially in the decades following decolonisation, history has demonstrated that the material advancement of poorer social groups can be, and is possibly better, achieved when the state obtains some measure of effective independence from the core of the global economy. Within the current conjuncture, the crisis of the liberal global order that worries Anglo-American commentators so much might broaden the scope for deeper political transformations in the region.<sup>70</sup> If, as outlined above, the main problem of real-existing anticolonial nationalism was its pursuit of emancipation from dominant global powers at the expense of domestic social emancipation, some of the unintended consequences of neoliberal globalisation might hold major implications. If rising inequality erodes the middle ground, making gradual and moderate transitions harder, in oil-scarce states especially it produces social and often also geographical polarisation, which in turn reduces social fragmentation, for instance between impoverished middle classes, however defined, weaker organised labour, and burgeoning 'informal proletariat'.<sup>71</sup> This embryonic subaltern alliance was at the heart of the Arab uprisings, and put forward demands that were political and economic, formal and substantive at once.<sup>72</sup> The Tunisian case shows that liberal-procedural democracy implies a reaffirmation of subordination to the material and temporal imperatives of neoliberal globalisation, and is thus unable to fulfil the socio-economic demands of the uprisings. As the gradualist path is occluded as well as limited in its substantive outcomes, transitions in the Middle East might have to pursue political and economic emancipation at once, within the social formation as well as in its relations with the global economy. This entails delivering on the twin promise of the anticolonial movement, reviving its once defeated challenge to the temporality of capitalism and the global and regional relations of dependency stemming thereof.

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<sup>70</sup> Radhika Desai (2013) *Geopolitical Economy: After US Hegemony, Globalization and Empire* (London: Pluto Press).

<sup>71</sup> Mike Davis (2006) *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso).

<sup>72</sup> Roberto Roccu (2013) David Harvey in Tahrir Square: The Dispossessed, the Discontented and the Egyptian Revolution, *Third World Quarterly*, 34(3), pp. 423-440.



## Conclusion

If, following Gramsci, we are willing to look at the past through the lens of absolute historicism, and to think of possible futures beyond the current epoch and its duration, then we might overcome the strictures, analytical and normative at once, of democratisation theory, which also affect the literature on authoritarian persistence in the region. Insofar as it is open to the possibility of political time as discontinuous, of transition as abrupt, and of democracy as understood beyond its liberal-procedural definition, this approach allows us to envisage alternative paths to regime, and more broadly political, transformation. Hence, as much as it sounds daunting, recasting transition as rupture, as a fleeting moment for transcending the temporality of capitalism, promises to create the room for the individual and collective emancipation of subaltern classes across the Middle East.

While memory only plays a marginal role in this paper, the critique and contestation of dominant understandings of time and transition is an inescapable starting point for investigating how specific states and social groups have developed individual and collective memories of the past, and how they have sought to mobilise them for political purposes. In this regard, this paper contributes to the current special issue in three ways. Firstly, it shows how dominant literature has narrowed down the possible meanings of political time, transition and democracy. As collective memory is inevitably affected by dominant narratives of the past,<sup>73</sup> then the latter tends to restrict the horizons of political transformation towards a dichotomy between continuity and gradual change along a preordained path. Secondly, as it broadens the discussion of political time beyond *chronos* and duration and towards *kairos* and epochal change, this paper also enables an exploration of discontinuous, ruptural and substantive political transformations, with regime change conceived as only part of a broader structural transformation. Finally, through Gramsci's absolute historicism, this paper also addresses the extent to which the two main waves of globalisation have shaped the scope for political agency in the Middle East by subordinating the region to the needs of the core of the global economy. As a result, the temporality of capitalism in the Middle East has historically been a temporality of dependency. The promise to break up with this dependency on the part of the anticolonial regimes following decolonisation was only partially fulfilled, and as the project was defeated the temporality of capitalism was reasserted, as were its constraints on the speed, scope and direction of political transformation. As they challenged these

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<sup>73</sup> With reference to Lebanon, see Bassel Salloukh's contribution to this special issue.

constraints, the Arab uprisings have reignited the hopes of a democratic transition. And while democratisation literature tends to prioritise the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy at the expense of socio-economic concerns, transformations within and beyond the region suggest that democratic transition in the Middle East might well take a ruptural, as opposed to gradualist, form, and that democracy itself might have to be both political and economic, for it to respond to both the demands of the popular classes and the socio-economic transformations brought about by globalisation, that is: for democratisation to provide the foundations of subaltern hegemony.

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